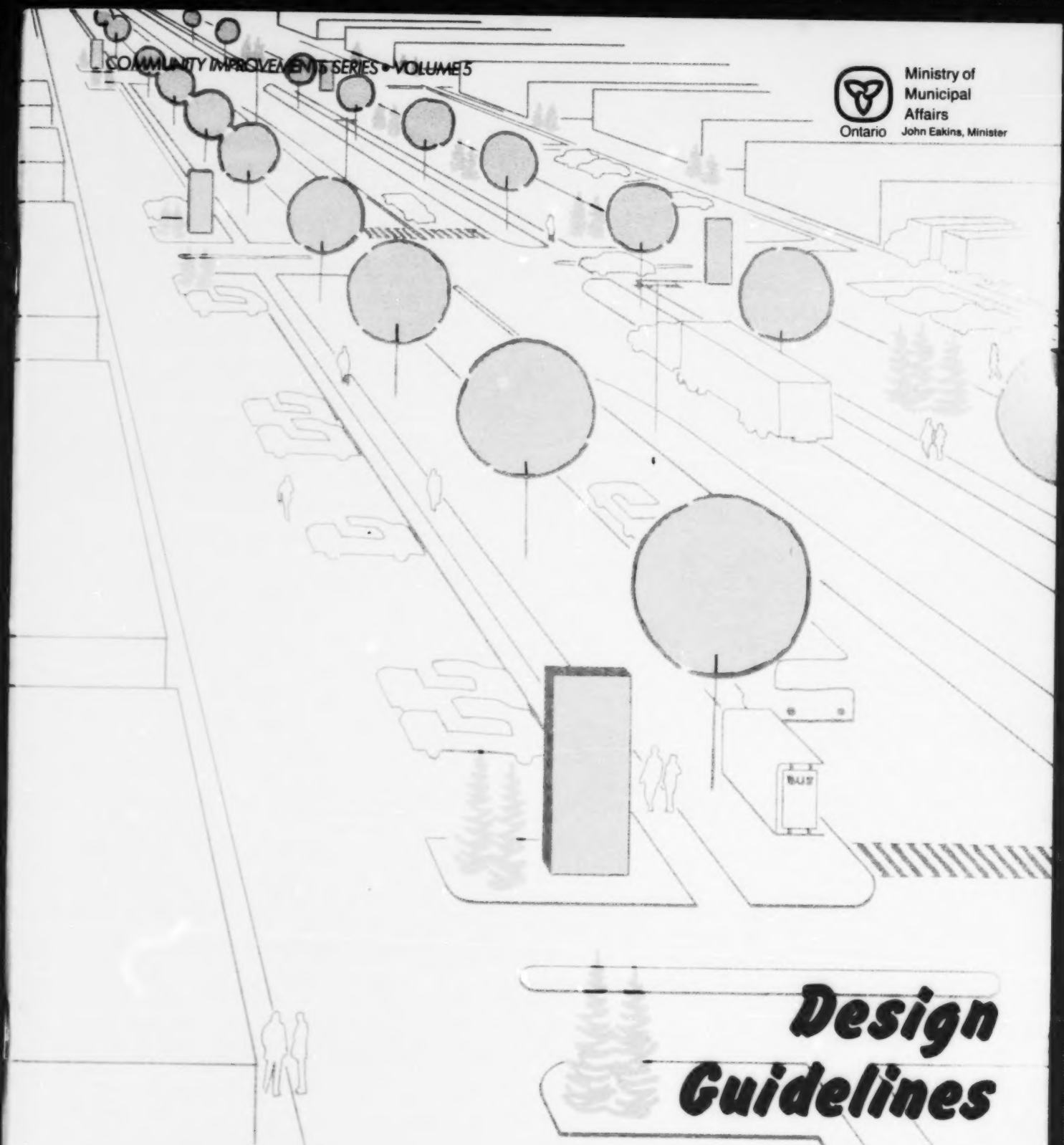
COMMUNITY IMPROVEMENT SERIES • VOLUME 5

Ontario Ministry of Municipal Affairs
John Eakins, Minister



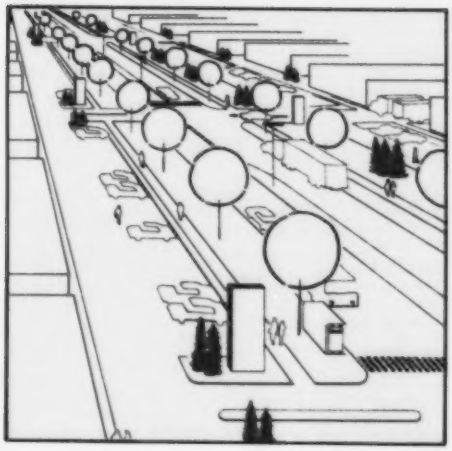
Design Guidelines

HIGHWAY COMMERCIAL AREAS

88-06088/

The publications listed below are part of an ongoing series that have been developed to assist in the understanding and implementation of Programs for Renewal, Improvement, Development and Economic revitalization (PRIDE) in Ontario communities.

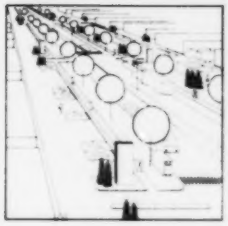
Community Improvement Series:
Volume 1 . Commercial Area Improvements: March 1985
Volume 2 . Commercial Facade Improvements: October 1985
Volume 3 . Older Industrial Areas: September 1986
Volume 4 . Urban Waterfronts, Planning and Development: April 1987
Volume 5 . Design Guidelines , Highway Commercial Areas : April 1988



Design Guidelines

HIGHWAY COMMERCIAL AREAS

April 1988

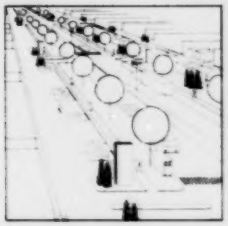


Foreword

Car dealerships, shopping centres, motels and drive-in restaurants typify highway commercial areas. Every community has at least one on its periphery. They usually contain the newest retail businesses and, from a strictly functional viewpoint, work well to meet the needs of their users. Problems can arise, however, where traffic increases cause localized congestion. Accident rates may even go up when drivers cannot distinguish entry points to retail outlets, or when disorienting signs overpower the skyline.

Interest in economic development has stirred municipal leaders in Ontario to look beyond the older parts of their communities. The potential of all areas is now gauged to assess their overall attractiveness for new industry, tourism or other local initiatives. Since highway commercial areas (HCAs) often create the first impression most people, investors or visitors, receive of a community, their appearance and continued economic health is critical. The newness of HCAs, along with their size and complexity has meant that few communities have tackled, or even recognized the potential problems.

The purpose of this handbook is to provide planners and other concerned individuals with a resource book which will help in assessing, planning and improving highway commercial areas. The handbook is divided into three main parts. The introductory chapter provides some background on HCAs. The middle chapter, on design, identifies the main issues of concern along these areas and sets out some generalized design guidelines. Finally the handbook contains a chapter on planning for the highway commercial area as a whole – creating a plan and using the available planning tools to best advantage.



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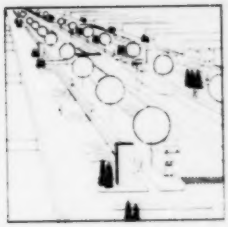


Introduction

Most highway commercial areas (HCAs) are economically viable and distinct from downtown. First developed in the 1950's, they are dominated by auto-oriented uses like car dealerships, fast food restaurants and gas stations.

Originally located on the outskirts of the community, they quickly became the place to site all those commercial activities that physically did not fit its existing commercial fabric. The HCAs were to be strictly functional serving not only adjacent neighborhoods or businesses, but also the community at large. Little attention was given to design or to the visual effect these areas would have on people entering the community for the first time. Nor were the eventual impacts of an extended HCA contemplated.

Characteristics of Highway Commercial Areas

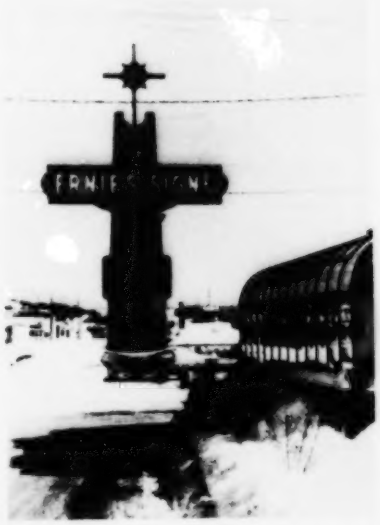
HCAs reflect varying combinations of the following characteristics:

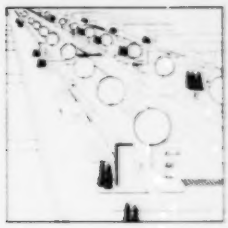
- Wide roadways with buildings set well back from the road – 30.5 m (100 ft) right-of-ways are not uncommon;
- Speed limits ranging from 50 to 60 km/h;
- Large numbers of franchises, such as McDonalds or Speedy Muffler King;
- Great expanses of unscreened parking;
- Individual buildings which do not relate to one another and are often separated by large distances from their neighbours;
- Shopping centres which turn their backs on the roadway;
- Over-abundance of overhead and portable signs;
- Little or no greenery or pedestrian amenities;
- Overhead wires and highway-style lighting.

There are common problems associated with HCAs that are found in community after community. These can be grouped into two broad categories: functional and visual.

The main functional problems relate to the automobile: safety, congestion at peak times, inadequate turning lanes, poor signage, poorly marked access points to businesses and conflicts with pedestrian movement.

Visually the problems relate to identity, image and cohesion. The strips are often indistinguishable from one municipality to the next; the image they portray is not related to the natural setting or architectural style of the rest of the community. Finally the array of signs can confuse and disorient the driver resulting in unsafe turns and accidents.





Design Guidelines

The design guidelines that follow illustrate, in generic form, ways a community might analyze and plan for the future of its highway commercial areas. They, first of all, look at the total streetscape and then move to examine specific elements:

- Public right-of-way
- Major intersections
- Parking
- Buildings
- Vehicular movement
- Pedestrian movement
- Vacant sites
- Signs.

Each element is discussed from two perspectives. One describes the issues to be addressed; the other contains a written and graphic explanation of how the problems may be resolved.

Each community will have its own individual needs. Therefore, municipalities may wish to refine and/or apply the guidelines that follow to better address local conditions. This should be done not only in consultation with local business people, but also with other agencies responsible for roads, particularly on safety-related matters (e.g. Ministry of Transportation, County).

The preparation of design guidelines is only a part of a much broader planning process which will have to take place to physically create changes in the HCA. The last chapter in this handbook presents an overview of how the planning process might evolve and describes the planning tools, in addition to the guidelines, that a municipality can use to implement improvements in these areas.

Design guidelines for HCAs will help to achieve a more cohesive, attractive and safe street environment. They will provide direction in the preparation of development applications eliminating much of the guesswork on the part of developers. The guidelines will also help businesses contemplating landscaping, signage or building improvements.

Public Right-of-way

issues

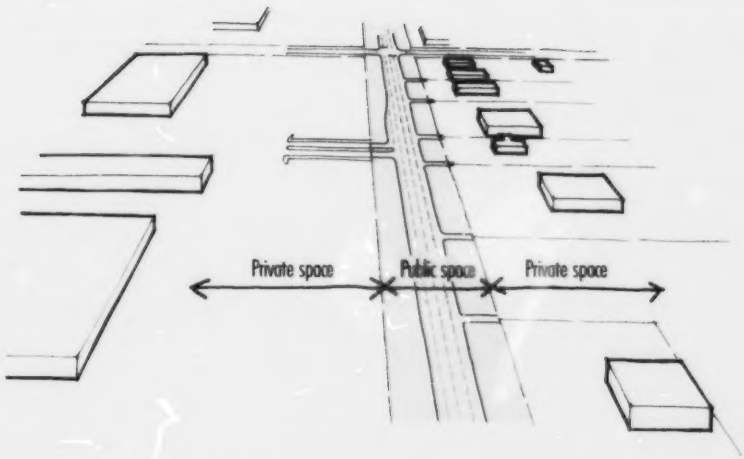
- HCAs are usually several blocks long without any building or grouping of buildings to provide a focus for activity or the eye. Wide roadways combined with deep setbacks and with wide side yards limit the visual continuity that building fronts should be providing. Also the spread out form of development and the varying building styles usually do not reflect the architectural character or building materials of commercial development elsewhere in the community.

- Overhead lines (hydro/telephone/cable TV) contribute to the cluttered image of the HCA. In many instances this interferes with the visibility of existing signage.

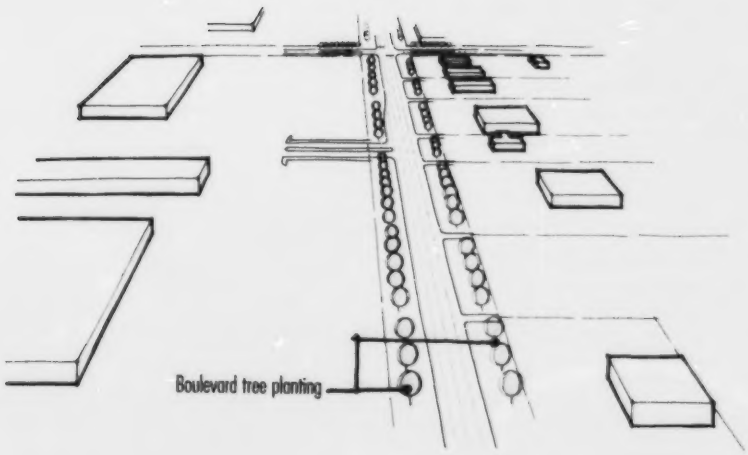
- Landscaping in the public ROW is generally absent. No attempt is made to enhance the streetscape during the winter.

guidelines

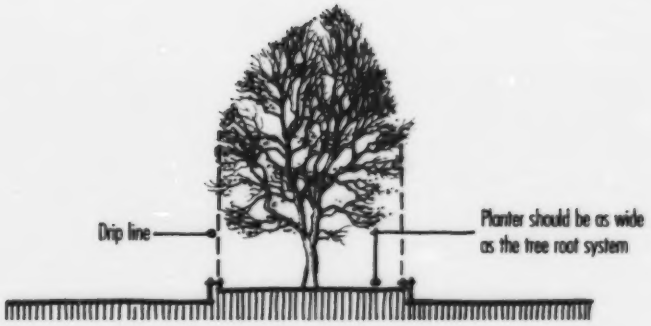
- Remove all private uses from the public ROW and clearly define the limits of public areas with fencing, hedges, etc.



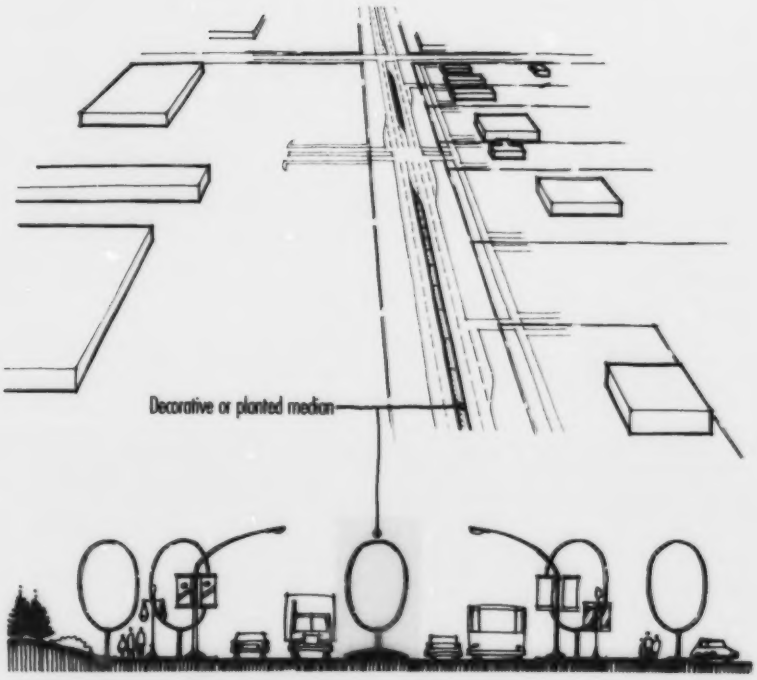
- To provide a strong image for the HCA corridor the public right-of-way could be landscaped with appropriate trees, shrubs and plant materials. Municipalities will need to prepare a concept plan to form the basis for landscaping and for the treatment of those areas where the right-of-way may not be wide enough for planting. Improvements occurring within the ROW should only take place after consultation with other agencies that may have responsibility over the operation and safety of the road in question. This will usually include the Ministry of Transportation.



- Plant materials should require low maintenance and be salt-resistant. Evergreens would provide interest and colour all year round. These, however, should be located away from areas affected by salt.
- Existing trees of good quality should be preserved. Care should be exercised during and after construction to insure their survival. Drastic grade changes should be avoided and planters should be appropriate to the size of the trees to be retained to avoid root disturbance.



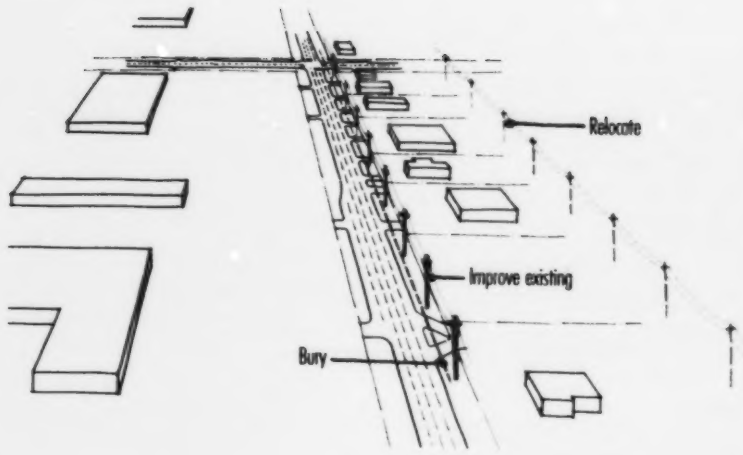
- A planted or decorative median strip can also effectively add interest to an HCA with a very wide right-of-way by reducing the perceived road width and indicating to motorists that they are entering a special area. In certain instances barrier medians may be necessary to improve the accident record on the highway. The local roads department or MOT will provide valuable information on accident rates and on the technical aspects of the implementation of this type of improvement.



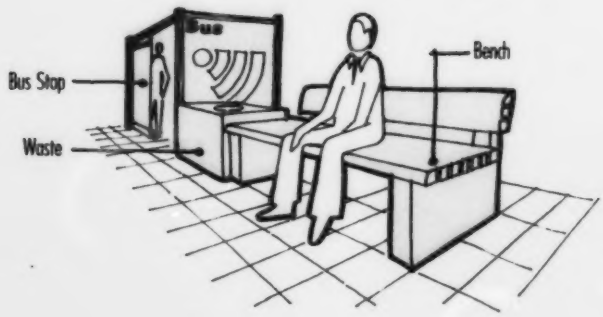
- Streetscape improvements cannot be successful without addressing the question of overhead wiring. The relative merit/cost of burying, relocating or improving the lines should be investigated by the municipality in consultation with the appropriate public agencies (roads department, MOT, public utilities, Bell Canada, etc.).

- Where relocation or burial of overhead lines is not practical, steel or concrete poles can be used. These are 50% or greater in cost than wooden poles but are more attractive and structurally rigid.

- Another way of improving the appearance of overhead lines is to increase the spacing between poles and avoid lines crossing the street. However, the latter can necessitate running lines down both sides of the street.



- Attractive street furniture, such as benches, bus shelters and waste receptacles should be provided at intersections, bus stops and where pedestrian activity is to be encouraged.



Median strips can incorporate flags, landscaping and light standards. City of Scarborough.

Boulevard planting. City of Scarborough.

Concrete utility pole. Town of Pickering.

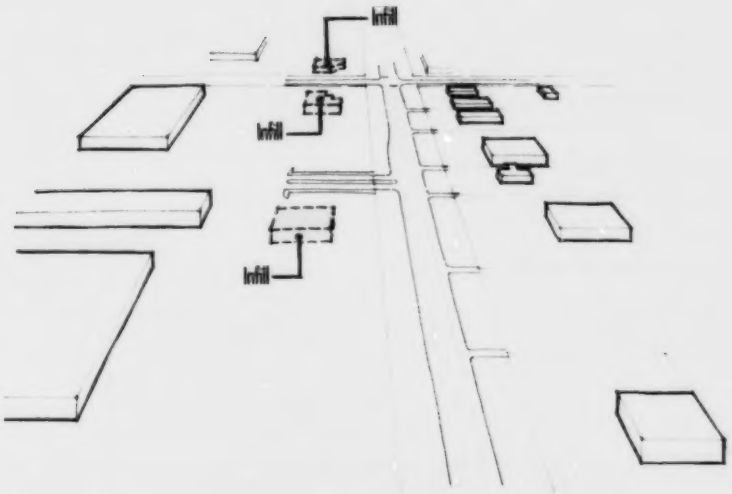
Major Intersections

issues

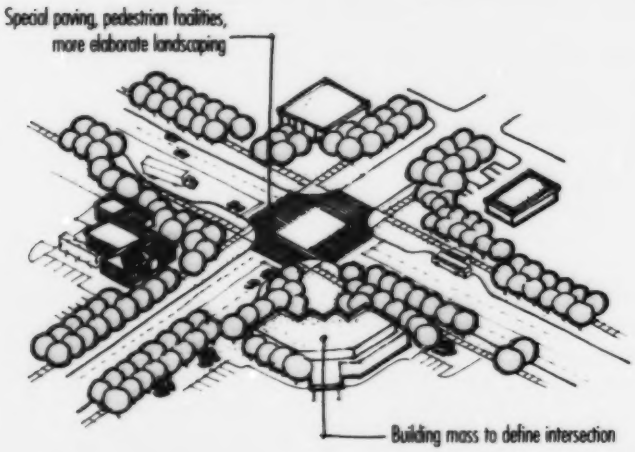
- Gas stations and parking lots tend to dominate major intersections. The advantages of these locations, in terms of exposure for other uses, are not generally exploited.

guidelines

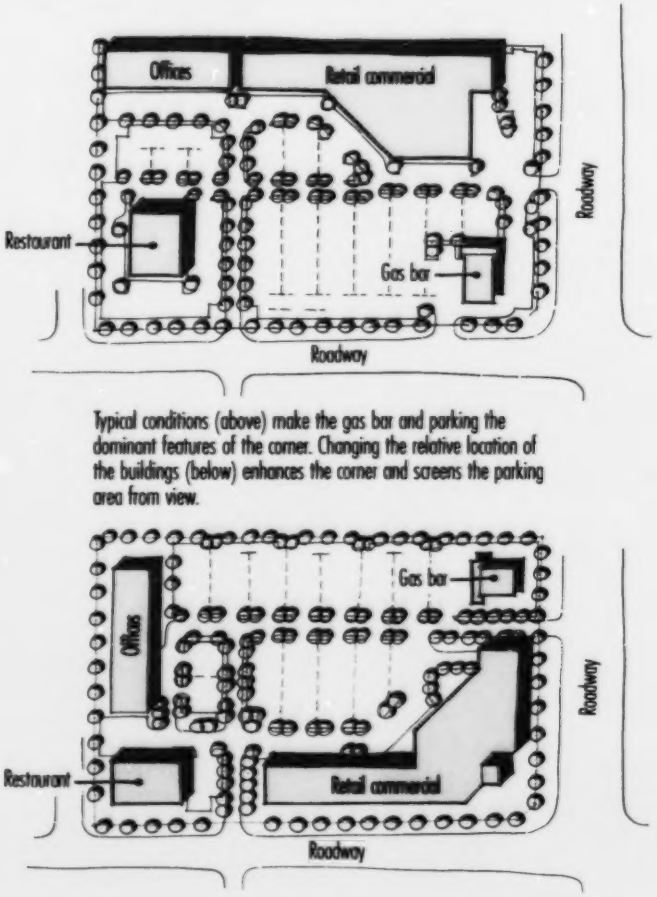
- Major intersections and other prominent sites, such as high points, could become major nodes and focal points of the HCA. The massing and siting of buildings should be appropriate to the visibility and activity offered by these prime locations.



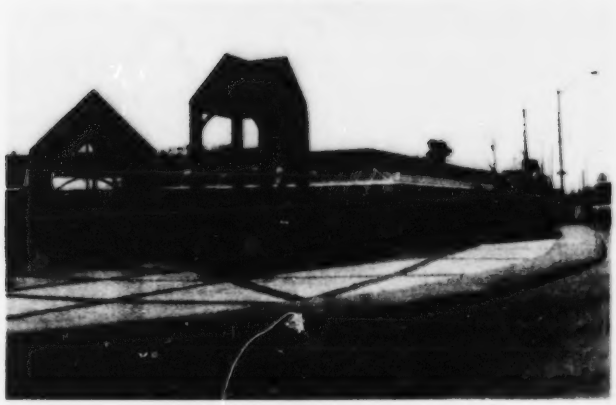
- Landscaping and surface treatment can enhance the importance of the location. If a theme is developed for the HCA, major intersections are ideal for its application.



- Corner locations are appropriate for uses where the building, not the car, is the dominant feature on the site (e.g. stores, offices or banks). Therefore, parking and gas stations should be avoided at major intersections.
- Setbacks at corner locations should be large enough to permit landscaping, pedestrian amenities and other interesting features.

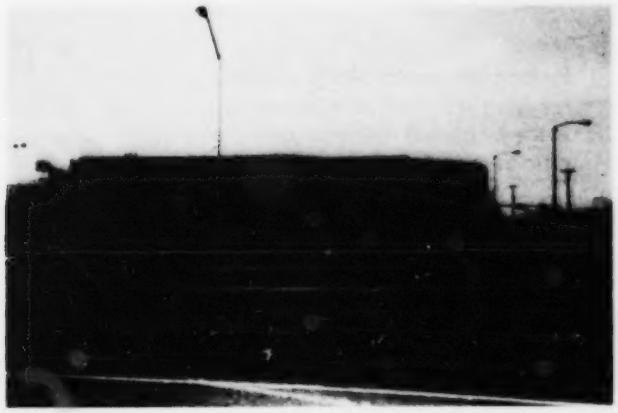


Typical conditions (above) make the gas bar and parking the dominant features of the corner. Changing the relative location of the buildings (below) enhances the corner and screens the parking area from view.



Reduced set-backs, interesting architectural features and special paving improve the appearance of major intersections.
City of Mississauga.

Corner location treatment.
City of Mississauga.



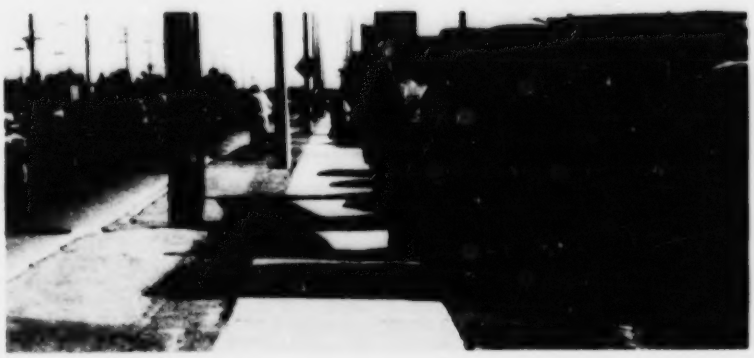
Reduced set-backs and landscaping add interest to a major intersection.
City of Ottawa.

Parking

issues

- Off-street parking areas are often characterized by large, uninterrupted expanses of parking situated between buildings and the street.
  Parking is seldom provided at the side or rear of buildings.

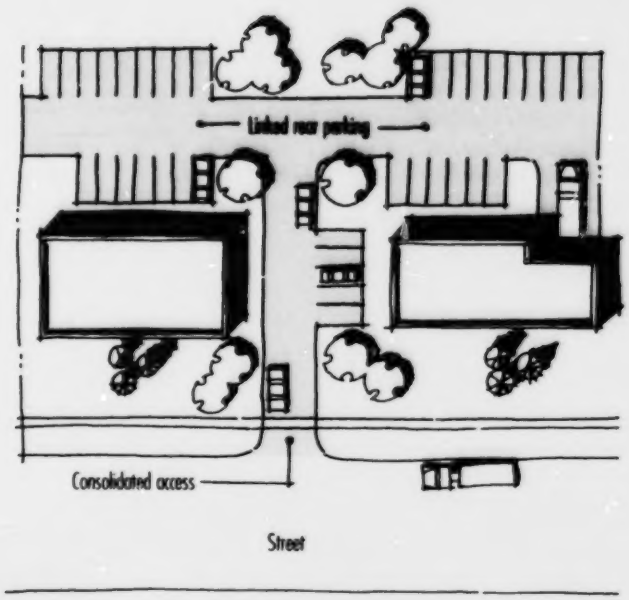
- Often, on parking lots, no allowance is given for car overhang.
- Parking lots are usually unscreened from the roadway or sidewalk and often encroach onto the public right-of-way.
- Access/egress points may not be clearly defined.



- Parking lots are not always paved resulting in difficult manoeuvering in the lot as well as carrying mud onto the roadway.

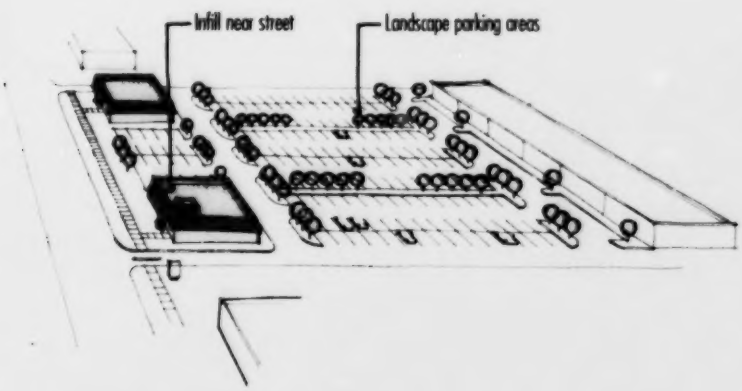
guidelines

- Where practical, parking should be encouraged at the side or rear of buildings rather than in front. Parking areas at these locations should be well-identified from the road.
  Loading and delivery areas should be confined to the rear of buildings.



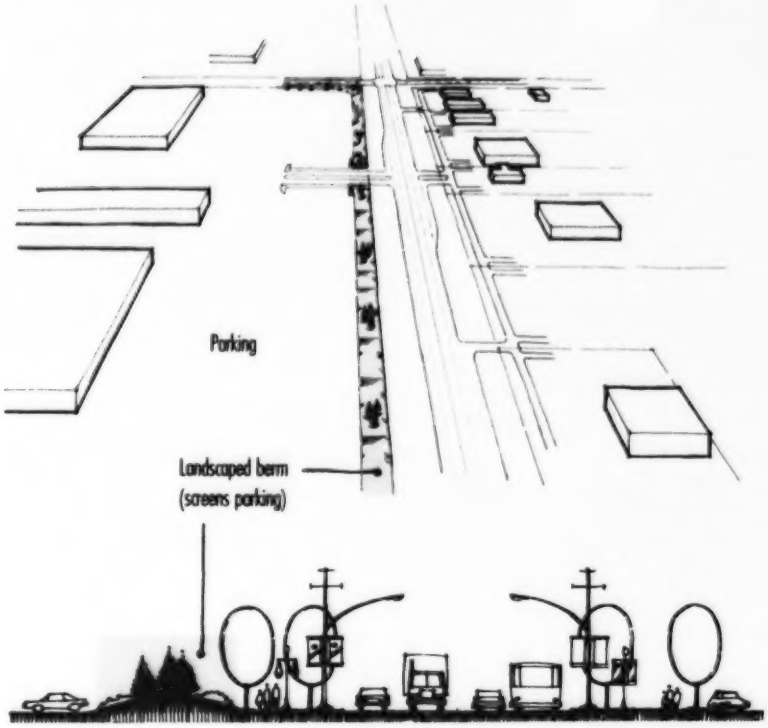
- Minimum landscaping requirements should be established for new development. Landscaping may be employed to define access points, provide human scale and create a feeling of enclosure. A minimum 10% of the commercial lot area should be landscaped.

- Large parking lots may be divided into smaller areas with landscaping. They may also be partially screened from the street by buildings.

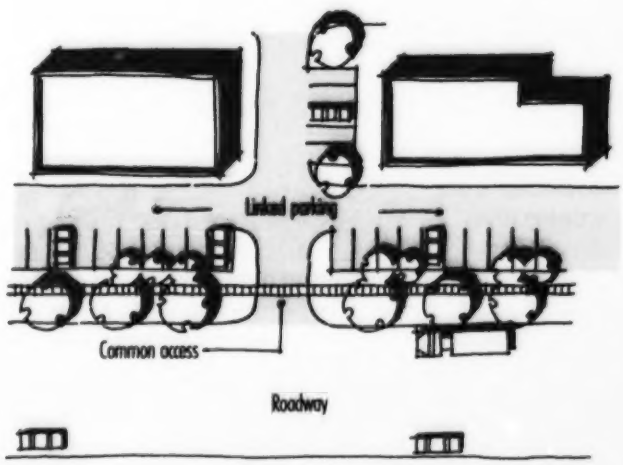


- The visual impact of parking areas, from the street, may also be softened through the judicious use of berming and planting. Safety factors, such as clear visibility of entranceway locations and traffic sight-lines, should be respected when placing plant materials.

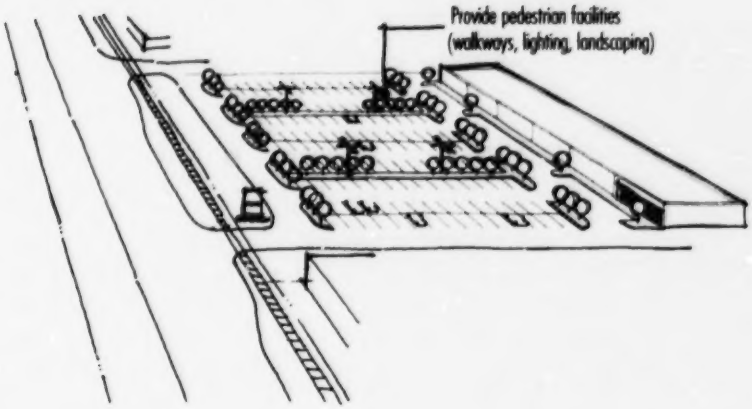
- Planting strips should be required along the street frontage of new development. A buffer of 6m minimum should be required along streets and highways. Appropriate planting standards should be established by the municipality.



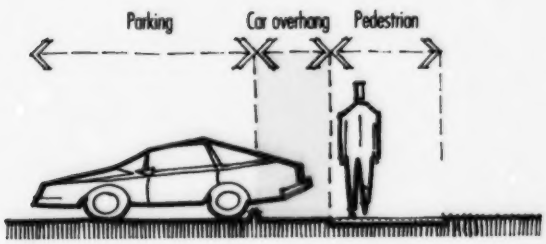
- Linked parking areas should be encouraged to reduce the number of turns onto and off the major road.



- Parking layouts should facilitate the safe movement of pedestrians by providing walkways separate from automobile traffic. Pedestrian routes should be parallel to the traffic aisles, and cross roadways at the fewest possible points.



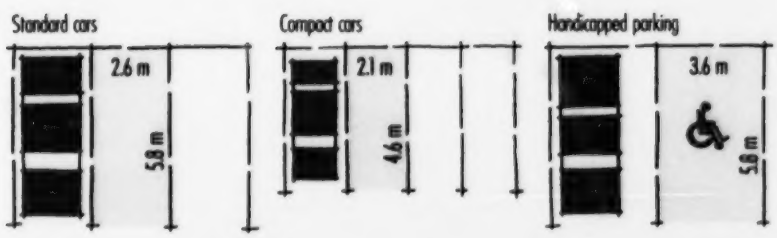
- Parking lots adjacent to pedestrian paths should be at least .5m longer to allow for car overhang.



- Parking layouts might also incorporate smaller parking stalls for compact cars to reduce the overall land requirements.

- Handicapped parking at strategic locations should be provided.

- Parking areas should be hard surfaced and curbed.



Parking lot integrating large trees.
Detroit, Michigan.

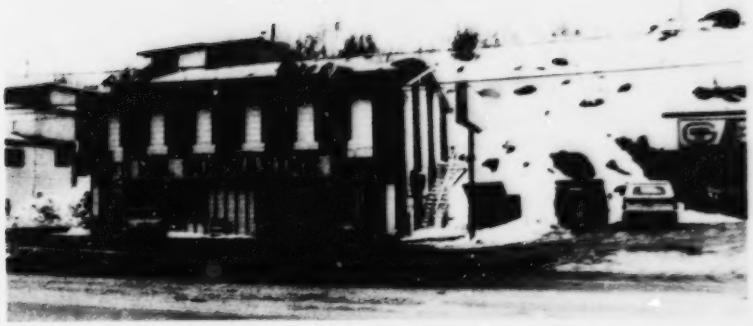
Parking spaces well defined.
City of Windsor.

Parking lot screened from view by berming and planting.
City of Scarborough.

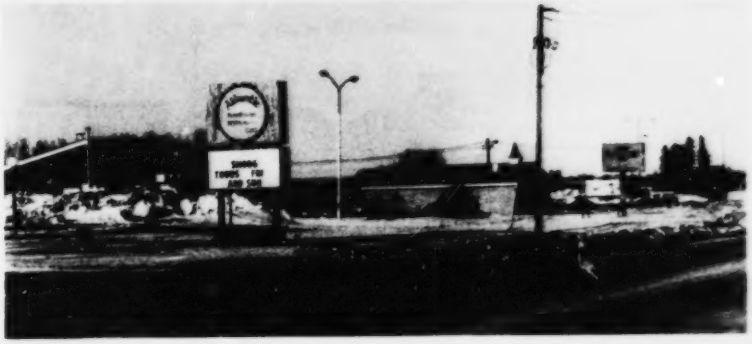
Buildings

issues

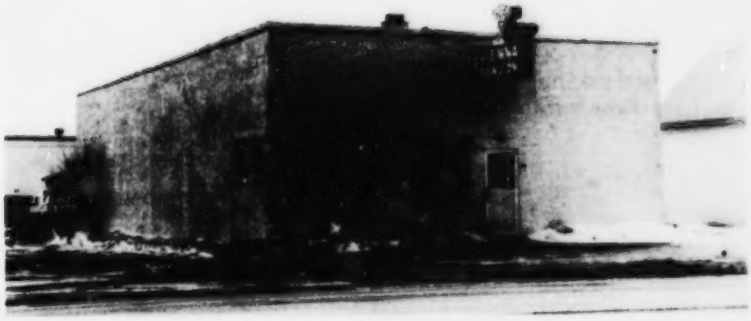
- The buildings in HCAs are usually "highly functional", with the materials and design bearing little relationship to the unique characteristics of the community or their neighbours on the strip. The corporate image and product recognition are often more important to the owner than the character of the local area.



- Large building set-backs add to the perceived width and poor definition of the commercial corridor.



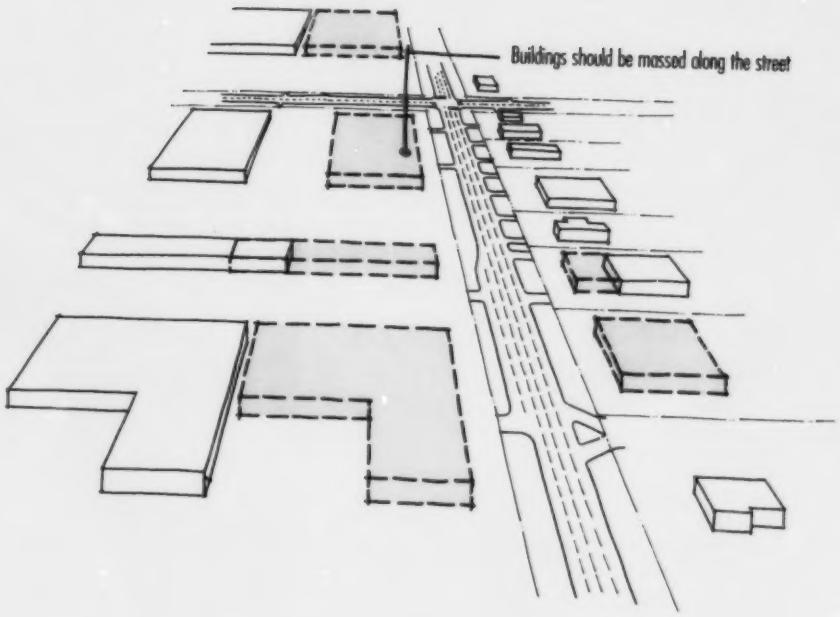
- Variations in set-backs also result in the exposure of unfinished side walls of buildings.



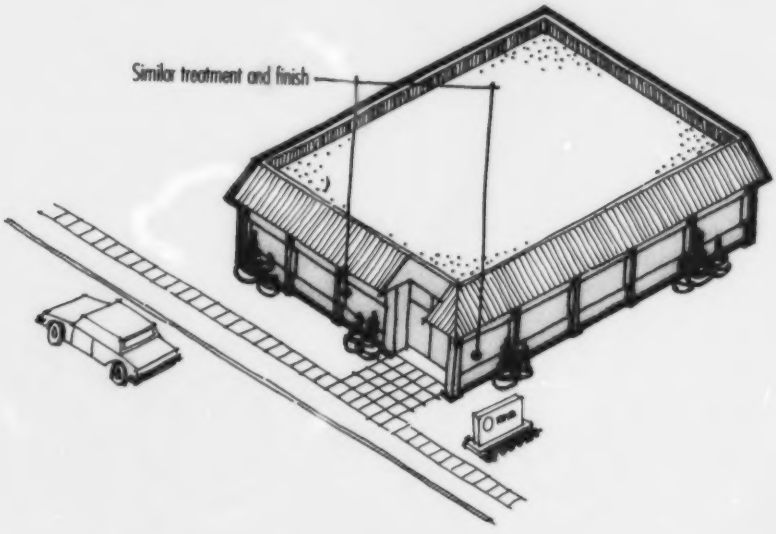
guidelines

- Buildings should be used to define the corridor. Uniform and perhaps reduced setbacks would create a sense of enclosure and reduce the apparent width of the roadway. However, in the cases where commercial development occurs on a major highway, the minimum setbacks established by MOT should be respected.

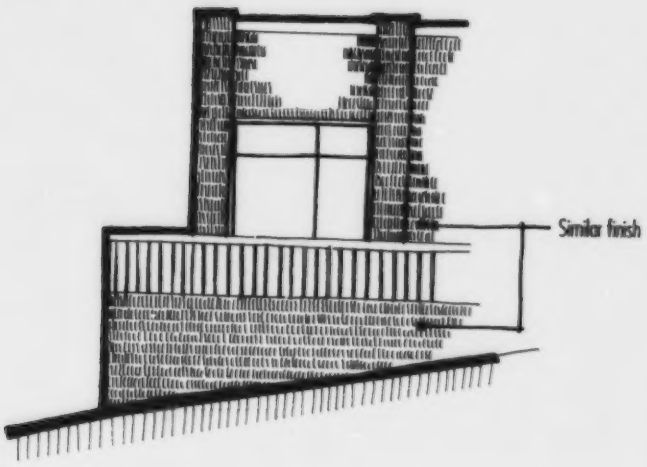
- Building design should strive to maintain and reinforce the local character rather than a corporate image. This is particularly important when residential uses are in the vicinity of highway commercial districts.



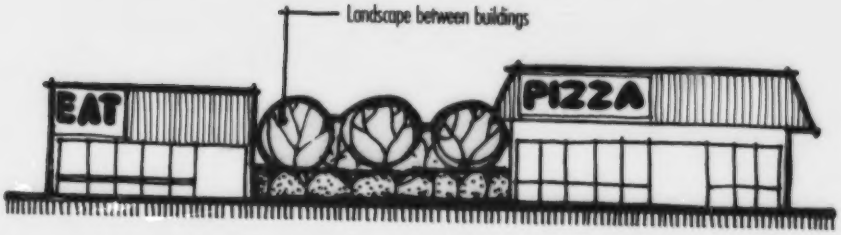
- Large exposed blank walls should be avoided. Uniform setbacks could minimize this problem. In addition, all visible sides of a building should be finished and treated similarly to the front.



- The finishes on retaining walls should be compatible with those of nearby buildings.

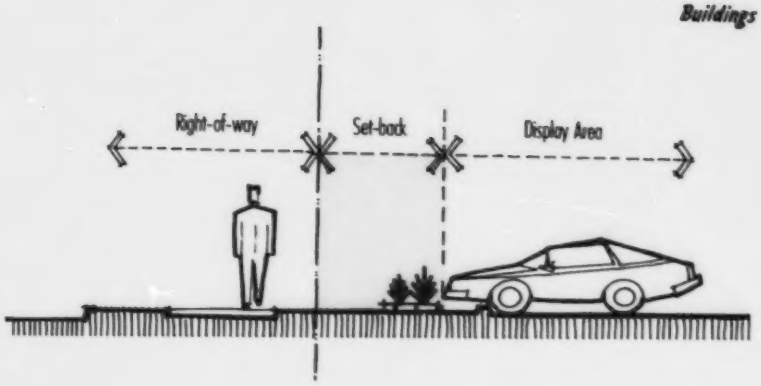


- Large gaps between buildings should be minimized and where they exist screening through landscaping should be attempted.

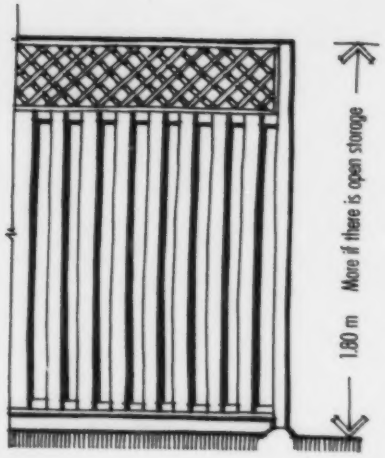


- Building entrances should be well-defined and accessible to pedestrians and the handicapped.

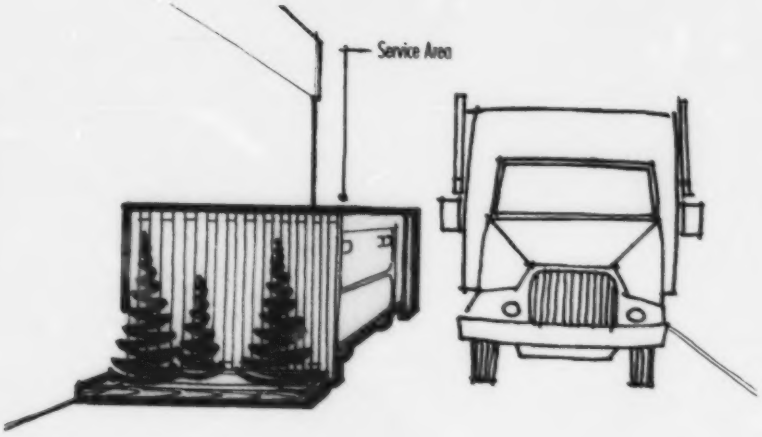
- Outdoor display areas (e.g. car dealerships) should respect setback regulations. Municipalities, through site plan agreement, may limit the amount of frontage dedicated to the display of goods.



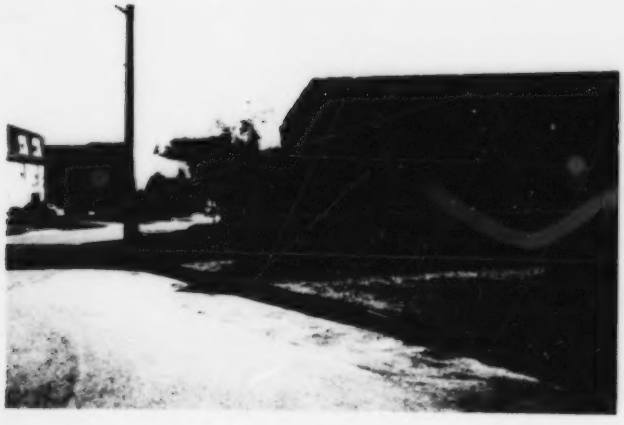
- Where commercial uses back onto residential areas, they should be properly screened using berms, fences or landscaping.
- Fencing should be solidly constructed, easy to maintain and compatible with adjacent buildings in terms of colour and materials. The HCA guidelines could include guidance on fence height, location, design and materials. Along the boundaries with other uses, 1.8m high fencing should be provided. If there is open storage the height of the fence should be increased to 2.0m.



- Service areas should be incorporated into the building design or screened from view through fencing or landscaping.



The design of commercial buildings can be compatible with surrounding residential uses.
City of Kanata.



Commercial development screened from residential uses.
City of Ottawa.

Screened and landscaped service area.
City of Ottawa.

Vehicular Movement

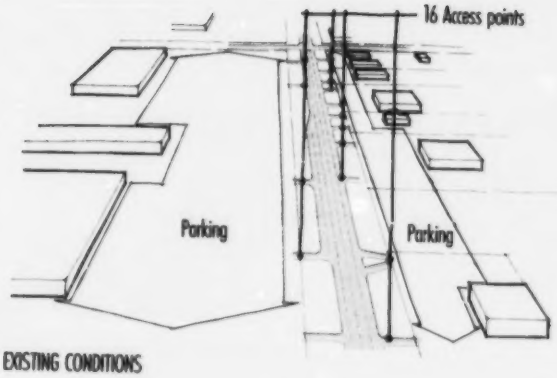
issues

- Large numbers of poorly defined driveways confuse drivers and increase the number of turns and the potential for accidents.

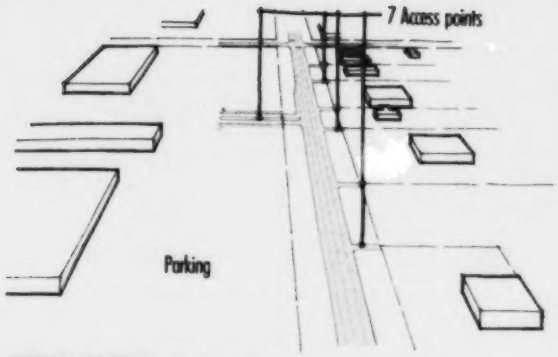
- Poorly identified entranceways also disguise ownership and responsibility for the public right-of-way lands.

guidelines

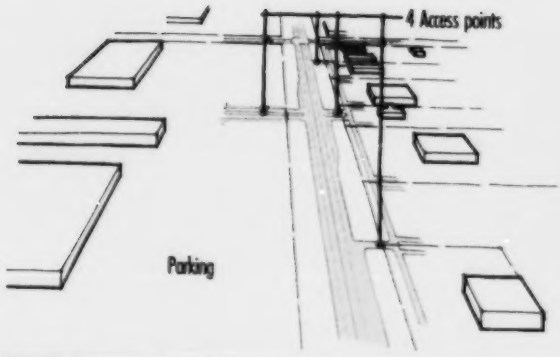
- The municipality should encourage the sharing of driveways in existing development and control the number of driveways provided in new development.



EXISTING CONDITIONS



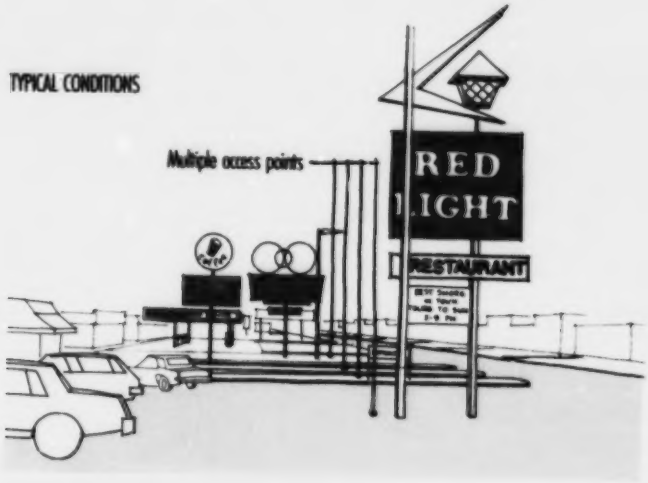
IMPROVED CONDITIONS: Shared Driveways



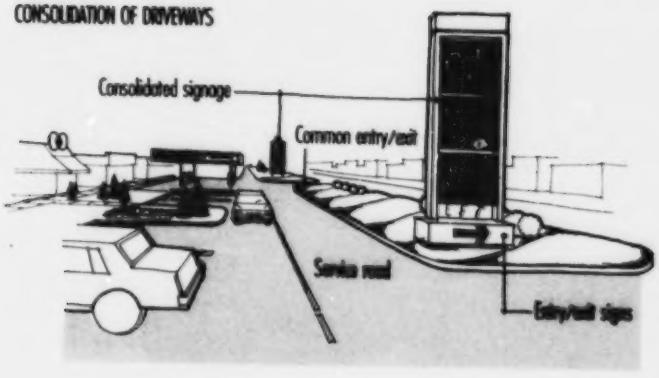
IMPROVED CONDITIONS: Common driveways and service road

- Separation between access driveways should be controlled to minimize the number of conflict points.
- Driveways should be clearly visible, curbed and properly signed.

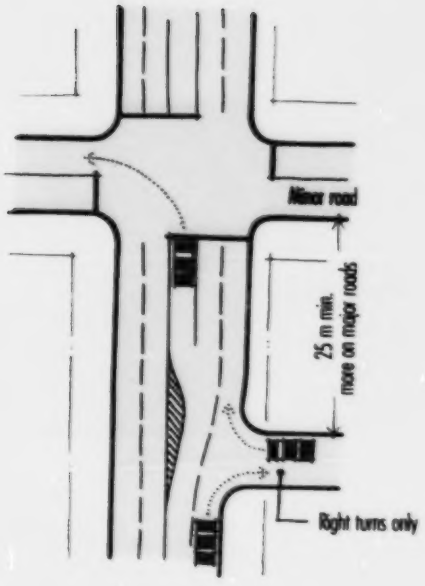
TYPICAL CONDITIONS

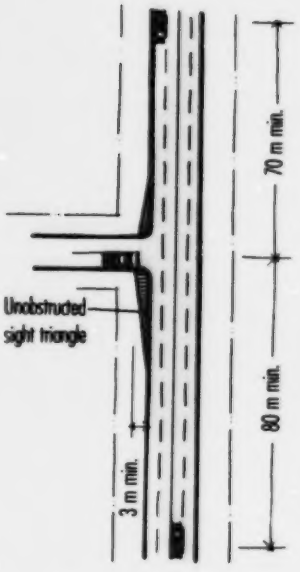


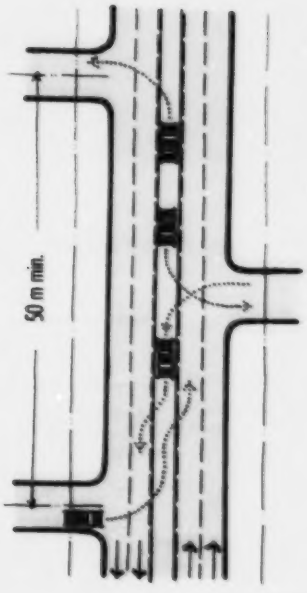
CONSOLIDATION OF DRIVEWAYS

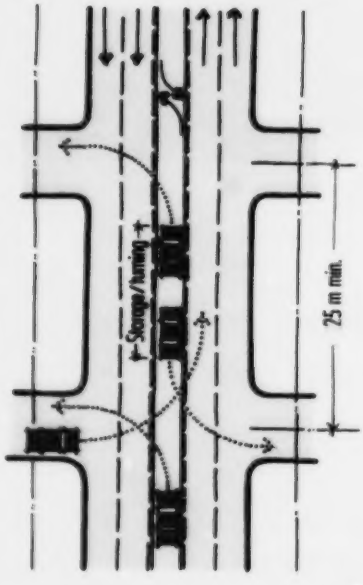


- Minimum safe distances between intersections and access points should be established by the municipality in consultation with other road authorities.
- Heavy usage sites should have holding lanes for cars waiting to enter and channelization for cars making left and right turn exits. Such areas, when located at corner sites, should be subject to minimum frontage requirements or other controls to ensure a reasonable spacing of entrances.

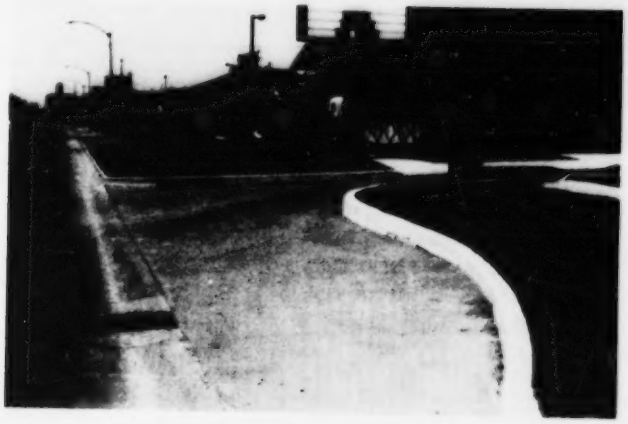








Service road linking several establishments.
Detroit, Michigan.



Well defined driveway.
City of Windsor.

Parking lot screened and landscaped.
City of Brampton.

Pedestrian Movement

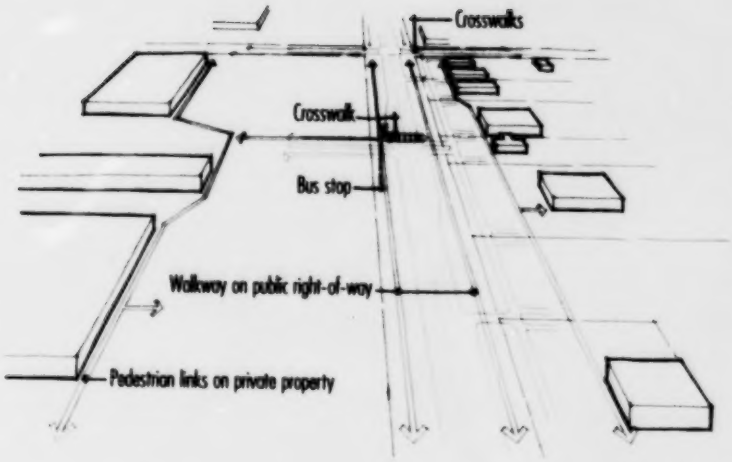
issues

- Many HCAs do not have sidewalks running the full length of the area or connecting it to the adjoining neighbourhoods. In addition, pedestrian amenities such as benches and bus shelters are generally lacking.

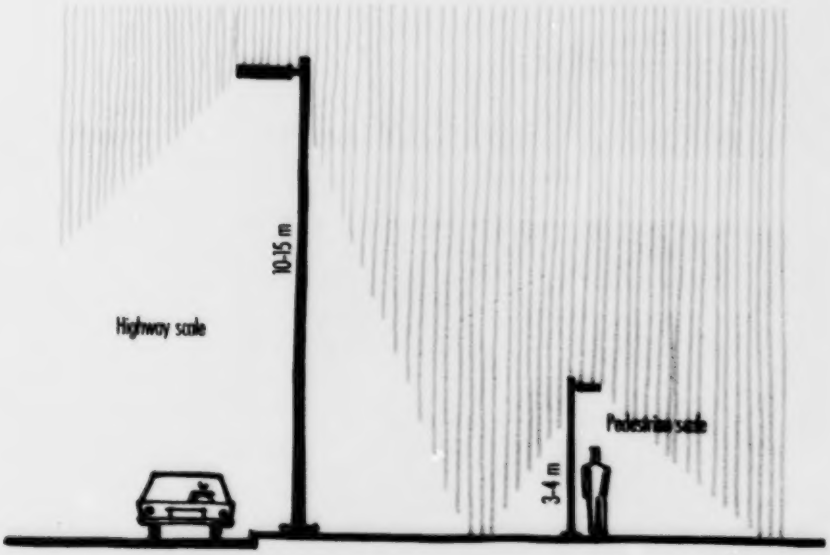
- The distances between buildings discourage pedestrian circulation, particularly during periods of inclement weather. Pedestrian routes are generally hard to find and crosswalks at locations other than intersections are not provided.

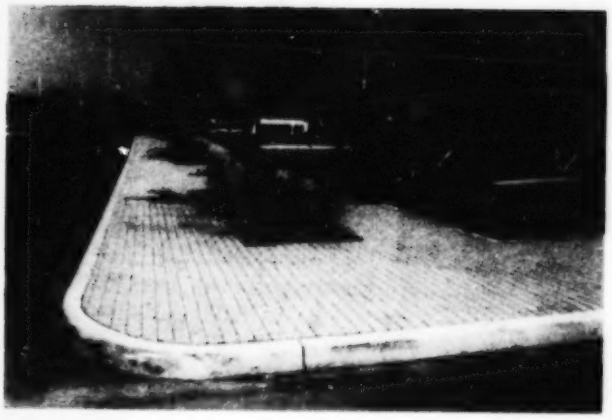
guidelines

- Pedestrians should be able to circulate among the commercial establishments in the HCA. Continuous access from property to property should be provided and, where feasible, should be designed for users in wheelchairs.
- Crosswalks should be conveniently located at intersections and other appropriate crossing points. They should be safe, clearly marked and lighted for night use. Bus shelters should be provided.

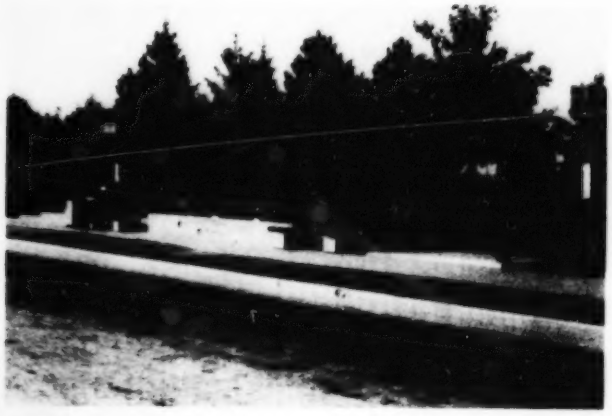


- High level lighting should be complemented with lighting standards of a more human scale (3-4m above the ground). Pedestrian walkways and vehicular access points would be appropriate places to locate this form of lighting.





Parking lot incorporating pedestrian walkways. Detroit, Michigan.



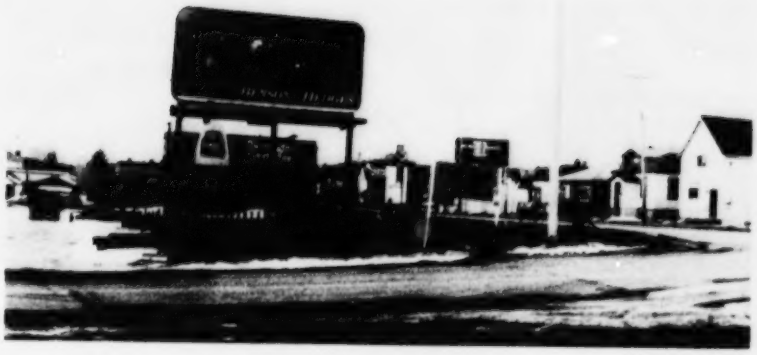
Bus shelter. City of Kanata.

Bench and street planters. City of Scarborough.

Vacant Sites

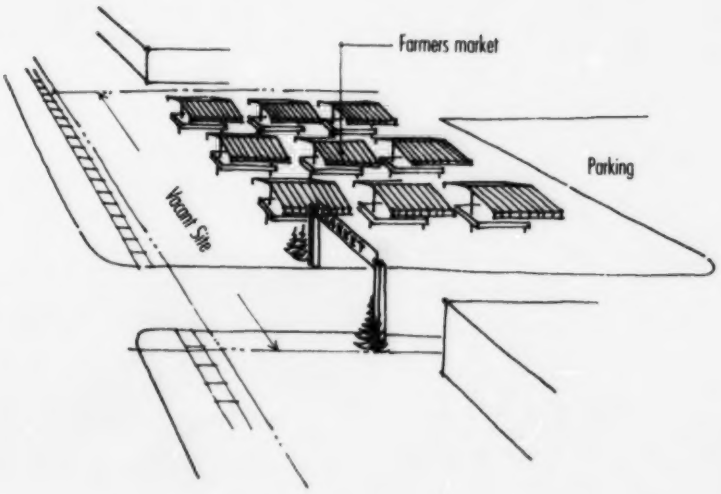
issues

- Vacant or under-utilized sites are generally detrimental to the appearance of HCAs. Often grass is not cut, weeds are not controlled and debris is allowed to accumulate.
- Vacant sites, visible from the roadway, may also be used for the storage of wrecked cars or the dumping of discarded building materials.
- Billboard signs located on vacant sites contribute to the cluttered and ill-kept nature of the area.



guidelines

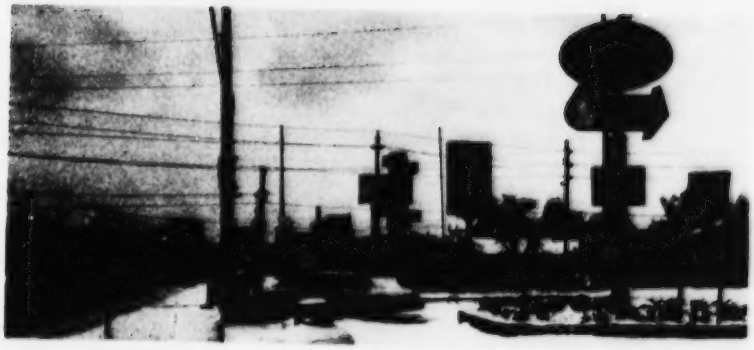
- Municipalities should strictly enforce property maintenance standards to ensure that vacant sites are kept free of litter, debris, wrecked cars, etc.
- In cases where sites are likely not to develop for a long period of time, municipalities should consider landscaping the public frontage of these areas. Municipalities might also promote activities that, on a temporary basis, would upgrade their appearance.



Signs

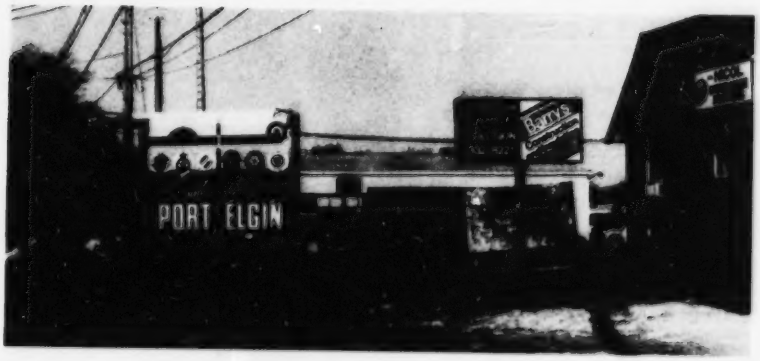
issues

- The clutter generated by signs is one of the worst features of HCAs. This is caused by the largely uncontrolled number, size, shape, colour and design of the signs erected in these areas.
- Many signs are difficult to read because of the number of messages per sign.



- There may also be temporary signs located on the public right-of-way. Some of these signs tend to become permanent and add to the cluttered and disorganized look of HCAs.

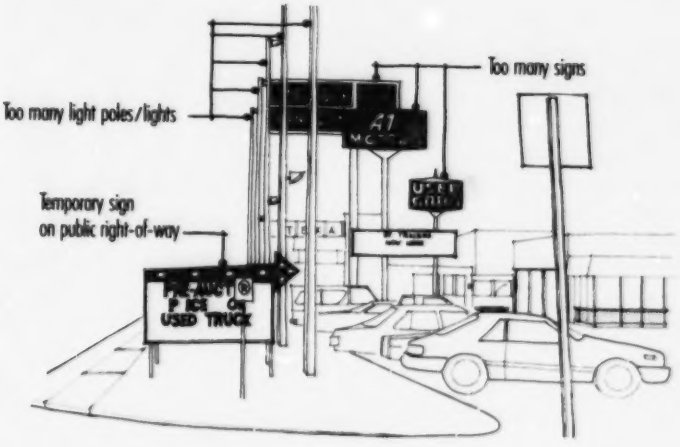
- Visitor welcoming signs may be absent from the entrances of towns. Where they do exist, they may be obscured by commercial signage.



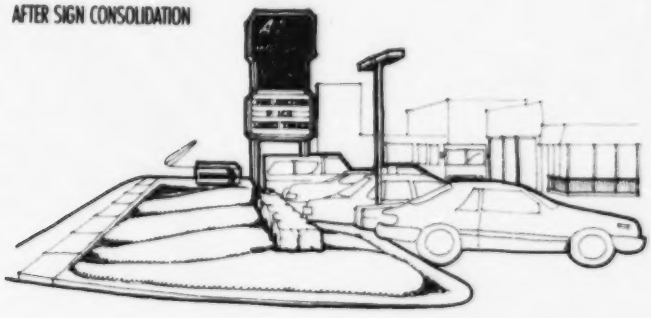
guidelines

- The size, height, type and location of all commercial signs should be comprehensively regulated. All private signs should be removed from the public ROW.
- The number of signs per property should be limited to those absolutely necessary.

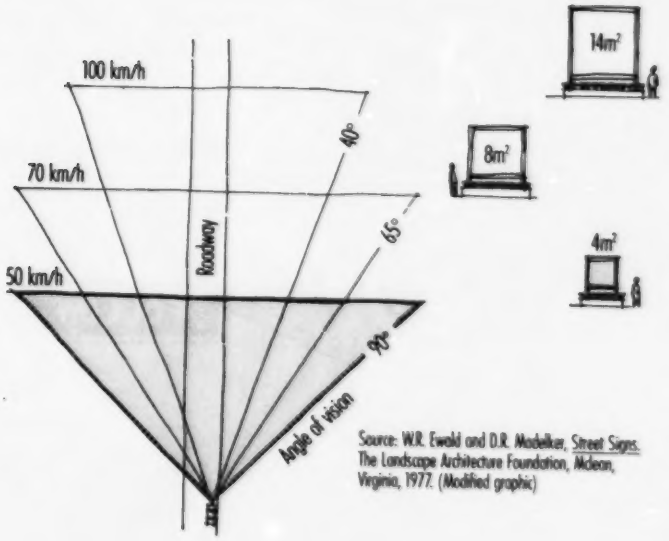
BEFORE SIGN CONSOLIDATION



AFTER SIGN CONSOLIDATION

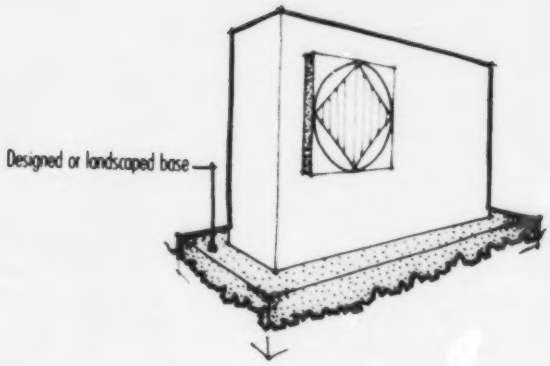


- The number of messages on a single sign should be limited to those which can be read at normal driving speed without impairing safety.
  Size of signs and lettering should be determined by the permitted driving speed and should be no greater than what is required for visibility.
- Signage should be consolidated whenever possible.

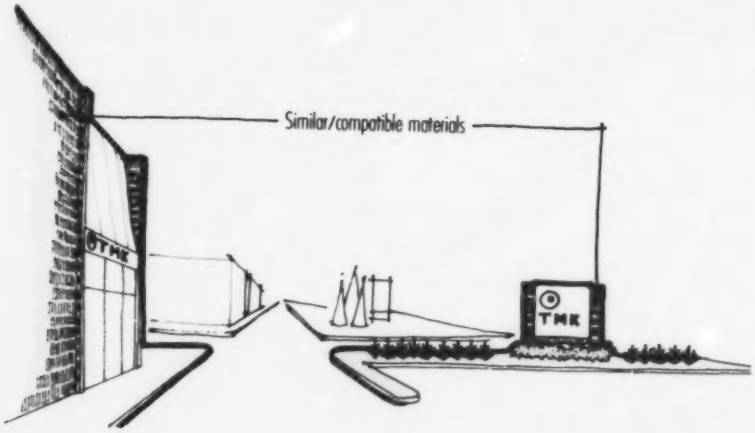


Source: W.R. Ewald and D.R. Madelker, Street Signs. The Landscape Architecture Foundation, Mclean, Virginia, 1977. (Modified graphic)

- Free-standing signs should be installed on a landscaped or decorative base. Portable signs should only be allowed in very special circumstances and should be subject to the same criteria as permanent signs.

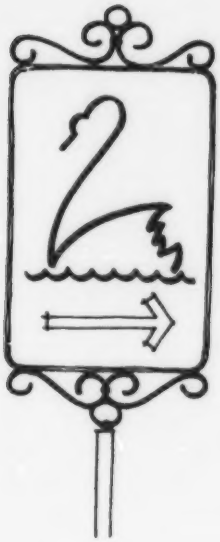


- Signs should complement the architectural design and materials of the buildings.
  Signs and other street furniture should be integrated into the landscaping.



- Public signage should be standardized so that it is not confused with commercial signage. An opportunity exists for the use of international graphic symbols in signage directing motorists to parking, food, accommodation and fuel.

- Tourist destinations such as downtowns, waterfronts, information centers and other attractions may be identified with signs incorporating the municipal or BIA logo. This kind of sign offers an excellent opportunity to raise the profile of an area by using a distinctive logo.



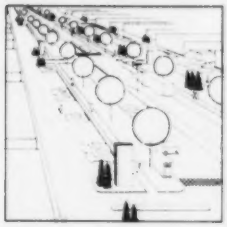
- Welcome signage may be provided at the entranceways to the community. These signs should not have to compete for the driver's attention with commercial signs. The sites, for these signs, should be landscaped and well-maintained.

Good ground sign.
Detroit, Michigan.

Size of sign and lettering appropriate to HCA conditions. Landscaping unlikely to interfere with sign readability.
City of Mississauga.

Sign with clean lines performing its identification function well.
City of Ottawa.

Planning Highway Commercial Areas



Highway Commercial Areas (HCAs) are one of the most familiar parts of our communities and they reflect, perhaps more than any other area, individuality and entrepreneurship. Improvements to HCA's are likely to occur over a long period of time.

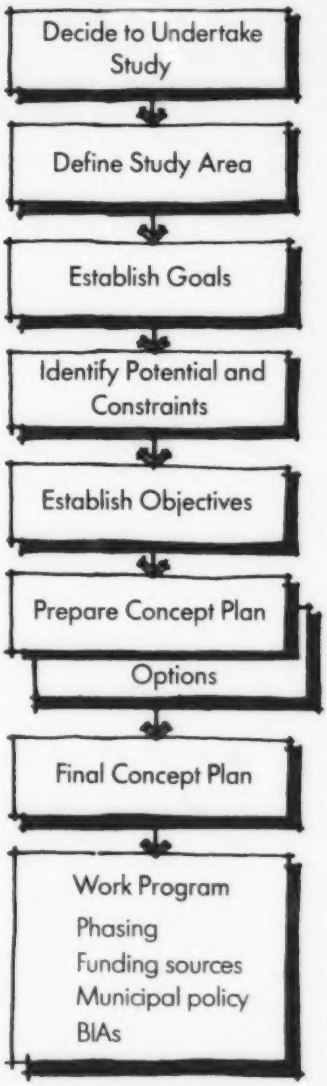
In the short term the opportunities for improvement will be greatest where new development occurs – where new municipal standards and guidelines can be applied directly.

On the other hand, the challenge will be greatest to get projects underway in parts of the HCA with existing development. Here, the vast majority of the improvements will be achieved through voluntary participation. To deal with the issues likely to be encountered, municipalities need to devise an overall strategy based on consultation, persuasion and example setting. For instance, planting and landscaping along a portion of the public right-of-way may trigger improvements in abutting privately owned lands.

In addition to a large number of private property owners, there will be a number of local, regional and provincial agencies with direct interests in what takes place along the HCA (e.g. Chamber of Commerce, Ontario Hydro, Ministry of Transportation). They will have to be consulted before improvements take place and should have input into the recommended changes.

Ultimately, the municipality will want its actions to be guided by a concise view of what the end result could look like. This will usually take the form of a concept plan and work program for the HCA. The concept plan should show the location and nature of the improvements to occur in the HCA. The work program should set out the actions, timing, costs, funding and responsibilities to achieve these improvements. The following chapter describes the steps involved in preparing a concept plan and work program for the HCA.

STEPS TO A PLAN



Berm screening parking from roadway.
City of Mississauga.

New development preserving and integrating existing mature trees.
City of Stratford.

Major intersection enhanced by architectural treatment.
City of Mississauga.

Decide to Undertake Study

A municipality may decide to improve its highway commercial areas for a number of reasons:

- The perception that the image of the HCA needs upgrading;
- High accident rates and traffic congestion;
- Complaints by nearby residents about noise; pollution, traffic and parking intruding into their neighbourhoods;
- Need to have design guidelines for a large number of new development proposals;
- Coordination of infrastructure up-grading with other identified improvement needs.

Define Study Area

The size and condition of highway commercial areas will vary considerably among communities. Some communities may have several HCAs, others may have only one of substantial size. When planning highway commercial area improvements it is most practical to concentrate on one strip at a time. The selection should be made based on what is currently known about the area: its problems, visibility to the tourist trade, importance relative to community economic development initiatives and the community improvement strategy, if one has been prepared.

The study area should be large enough to include the most pressing problems, similar/related land uses, major landowners and major activity areas, such as shopping centres. Planners may also want to consider the following questions when selecting the study area:

- Is the area too large in relation to the budget available for improvements?
- What unique opportunities does this study area offer?
- Is this the appropriate area to demonstrate the type of improvements that can be made to other highway commercial areas in the community?
- Is the HCA entirely within municipal boundaries? If not, how can a co-operative study effort with the neighbouring municipality be initiated?

Establish Goals

Once the study area has been selected, the factors which motivated the decision will need to be translated into goals. These goals will provide the focus for the subsequent concept plan and work program, but should be periodically reviewed. They should be general in nature, provide for long term direction and reflect the specific needs of the community, such as:

- To decrease traffic congestion along the HCA;
- To minimize conflicts between cars and pedestrians;
- To provide a distinctive gateway to the community for tourists and other visitors.

The goals should be formulated with public involvement. The foundation for a partnership with the private sector can be initiated at this critical stage. One way would be to establish a committee comprised of municipal staff, local politicians, other interested agencies and property owners/managers to develop the goals and objectives for the study and concept plan. Since HCAs often extend over more than one municipality (e.g. from urban centres into rural municipalities), it is important that representatives of all affected jurisdictions be involved in the process from the outset. In instances such as these, commitment to an improvement program by all parties is desirable. This commitment may be achieved through the formation of a joint planning advisory committee.

HCAs in many municipalities are located on highways or connecting roads for which the Ministry of Transportation is responsible. It is important for this agency to be made aware of the municipality's plans to insure that the municipal goals are compatible with the safety and functioning of the highway or with any planned improvements.

Identify Potential and Constraints

Although there are many similarities among highway commercial areas across the Province, each one will be unique in its own way. There may be a concentration of certain types of uses, such as car dealers. The topography and climate may present particular local problems for snow clearance or site design. In Sudbury, for example, rock outcrops pose problems for the siting of buildings and parking. However, natural elements in the landscape can also provide interesting and unique visual features if properly integrated into the fabric of development. In other highway commercial areas, tourist information stands, historic sites or a shopping centre may create a focal point.

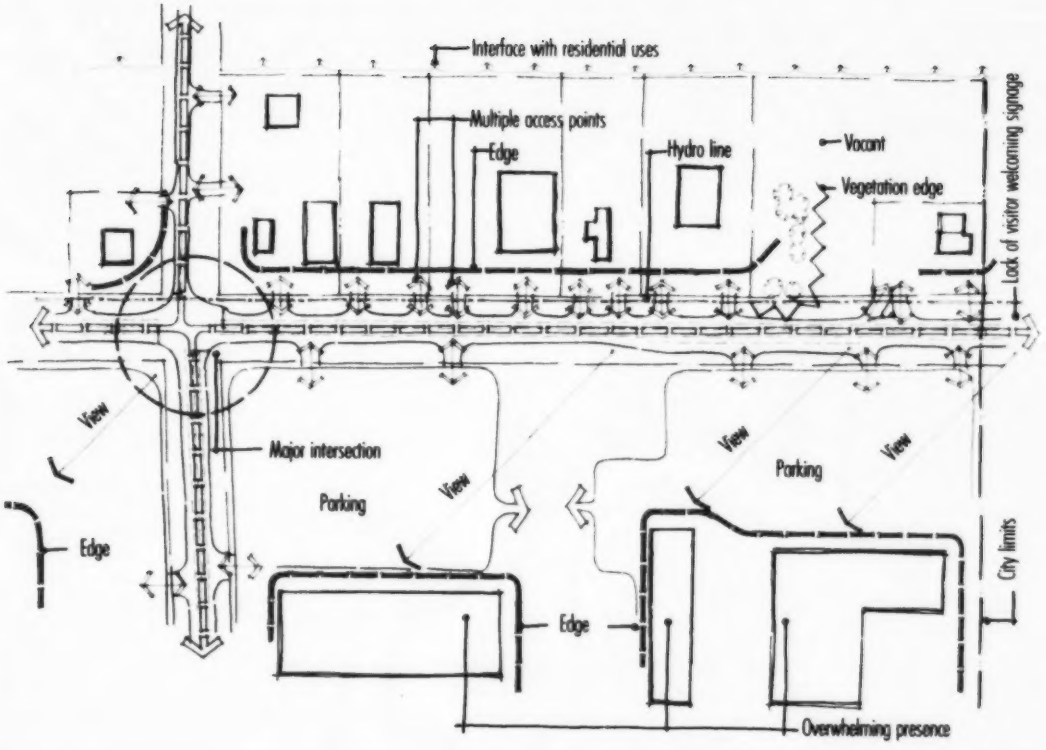
To provide a solid basis for the concept plan, the characteristics of each strip should be assessed in terms of the following:

- Land use and ownership patterns;
- Natural and unique features;
- Condition and location of infrastructure;
- Development activity;

- Traffic patterns and accident locations and road conditions;
- Vacant sites;
- Present and potential user groups;
- Economic conditions, such as the regional market size, business turnover, etc.;
- Adjacent land uses and road connections with the strip;
- Building conditions;
- Visual conditions: number of portable and other signs, building materials, existing landscaping, state of repair of roads, sidewalks and curbs, etc.;
- Existing official plan and zoning provisions.

This inventory of characteristics will provide a basis to evaluate the potential of the HCA. Input from property owners, users and other agencies (e.g. Hydro) may also be helpful at this stage. The evaluation of the conditions in the corridor may also require special studies in some areas such as traffic, engineering or consumer spending patterns.

SITE ANALYSIS



Establish Objectives

After the potential and the problems of the area have been identified, specific objectives should be developed. Objectives are the measures which can be taken to achieve the overall goals of the plan. They will of course vary with the local situation. Distinction should be made between those which can be accomplished by the municipality and those which will require joint public/private or private only actions. For example:

- The municipality will carry out landscaping and lighting improvements on the public ROW as a demonstration project.
- New private development will incorporate shared driveways.
- The municipality and property owners will work together to develop a theme for the HCA.

Prepare Concept Plan

Any program for improvement to an HCA will involve a number of individual works requiring a plan illustrating what specific changes are proposed, where they will be located, and the time frame for their implementation (phasing). Concept plans are the first step in preparing a final plan and they do not require a great deal of detail. Their purpose is not to set out detailed solutions, but to portray possibilities and generate discussion amongst the parties involved. They should indicate what kind of improvements are being proposed and how they are likely to achieve the objectives established earlier.

Since a range of improvements will be possible, several alternative concept plans should be prepared and reviewed in terms of how each achieves the goals set out for the area. These may be accompanied by a cursory cost/benefit analysis of each alternative and an indication of possible funding sources.

These concepts should capitalize on the uniqueness and special character of the community. They should also reflect solutions appropriate to the community, although some ways of handling common functional problems may come from other communities.

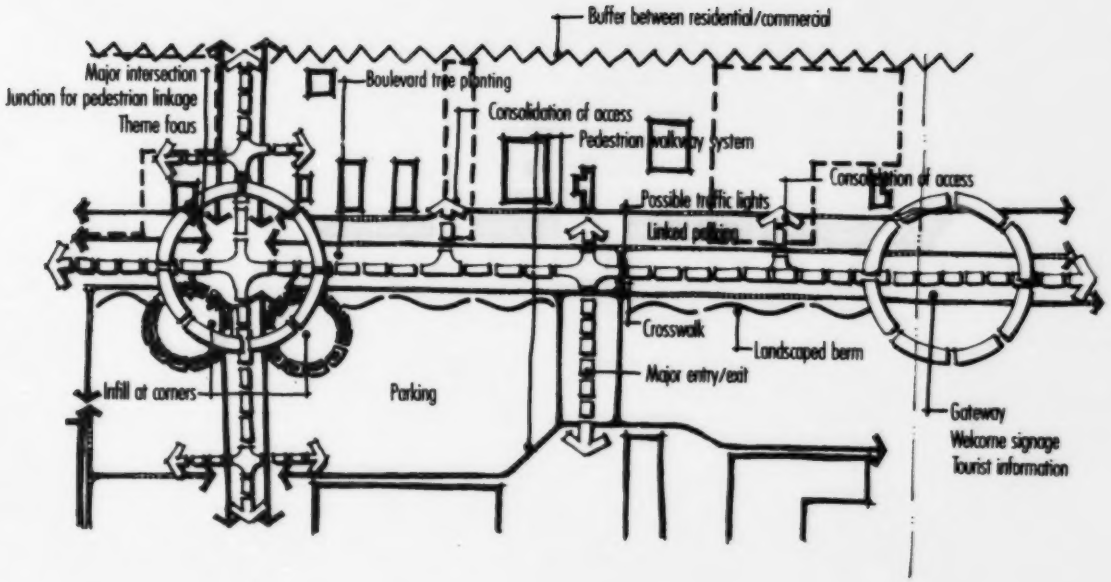
Final Concept Plan

The final concept plan will be a refinement of one of the alternative concepts or a composite made up of elements from different concept plans.

In the final selection process the following criteria should be considered:

- **Suitability** – Does the plan conform to the goals and objectives established at the outset of the project? How well will it resolve the issues in the HCA? Are the goals still appropriate? Does the plan resolve the concerns of interested agencies, private businesses and the public? How does the final plan relate to the community improvement policies, if any exist?
- **Costs** – How much will the project cost and how it will be funded? When will the funds be available?
- **Feasibility** – Can the improvements be carried out within the stipulated time-frame? Are there impediments to the undertaking?

CONCEPT PLAN



Work Program

Improvements to HCAs are likely to be undertaken over a number of years. A work program incorporating timing for any required policy changes, phasing, costs, personnel allocation and role of other agencies doing work in the project is essential.

Phasing

The phasing of improvements should take into consideration:

- Which improvement(s) will have the greatest immediate impact;
- Dependency of the improvements on each other;
- Other work already planned by the municipality or other agencies;
- Budgetary priorities.

It should be kept in mind that the first project to be undertaken will set the tone for subsequent improvements and for the way in which the community will view further expenditures. Consequently, the decision of what goes first is critical. Also if the improvements do not follow a logical sequence, inefficiencies are likely to occur. For example, burying overhead wiring should coincide with major road upgrading.

Funding Sources

An important aspect of planning for improvements is the identification of all potential sources of funding. Several government agencies have programs that may be applicable to improvements in HCAs, for example:

- Ministry of Municipal Affairs;
- Ministry of Transportation;
- Ministry of Tourism and Recreation;

The programs administered by these agencies may cover not only some of the construction costs, but also the costs of the studies leading to the improvements. For up-to-date information, these agencies should be contacted directly.

Sign integrated into a landscaped berm. City of Mississauga.

Municipal Policy

The official plan will provide direction for new private development and will guide physical improvements undertaken by a municipality. Municipalities should, therefore, decide if their current planning policies reflect the final HCA concept plan and amend the policies, if necessary, through the usual community planning process under the Planning Act.

In addition, municipalities have several planning tools to assist in the implementation of an HCA improvement program. Some of these tools are legislative (e.g. official plan policies, zoning), others are of a voluntary nature (e.g. formation of a Business Improvement Area). The individual needs of a municipality will dictate which combination of tools to use. The following sections focus primarily on those legislative tools that are available.

Community Improvement Policies (Section 28, Planning Act)

These policies, when incorporated into the official plan, integrate community improvement activities with the overall municipal planning framework.

Under the Planning Act, the community improvement process involves the following:

- Preparation and approval of official plan policies relating to community improvement;
- Designation of community improvement project areas;
- Preparation and approval of community improvement plans in conformity with the official plan;
- Implementation through the encouragement of private redevelopment and the rehabilitation, enactment and enforcement of municipal by-laws, and expenditure of funds on public works. As well, Business Improvement Areas can play an important role in implementing improvements.

The content of community improvement policies will vary from community to community, but should identify the problems, opportunities and solutions appropriate to individual municipal conditions. Formal adoption of community improvement policies are usually a prerequisite to obtaining financial assistance from other levels of government for physical improvement projects such as new or upgraded hard services. Some municipalities in Ontario, such as Stratford, have already designated one of their HCAs as a community improvement area in the official plan.

Community improvement plans should contain information related to specific projects and should be flexible enough to allow small changes to occur without requiring a formal amendment. In addition to containing background information on existing land uses, building conditions, social and economic conditions, services and public participation, the community improvement plan should include:

- The reasons for selecting the community improvement project area;
- The boundary of the area (map and description);
- A description of the properties to be acquired by the municipality;
- Proposed improvements to roads, sewers, watermains and other utilities and community facilities;
- A description of the properties to be rehabilitated by the municipality;
- Estimated costs of improvements;
- Means of financing, staging and administration.

Evergreens add interest during the winter. Town of Pickering.

Interim Control By-laws (Section 37, Planning Act).

Depending on local conditions, municipalities may choose to restrict development in an HCA until its concept plan is completed and policies set into place.

Interim control by-laws are extraordinary measures intended to provide municipalities with the power to control or limit development in a certain area while

land use studies are being conducted or development policies are being reviewed. These by-laws are not to be used to study individual properties and thereby frustrate or delay the property owners' rights to develop their property according to the permitted uses of the zoning by-law.

Interim control by-laws must conform to the official plan in effect and should identify the purpose for which the land can be used in the interim period. Interim control by-laws may be in effect for a one year period and are usually enacted after a resolution or by-law is adopted by council directing that a certain area be studied. However, an interim control by-law can be amended to extend its period of effect up to a maximum of two years from the date it was originally passed. Once an interim control by-law lapses, a further interim control by-law cannot be adopted for any of the lands in the study area for a period of three years.

An interim control by-law may be useful for those municipalities experiencing development pressures in an HCA that does not have an adopted concept plan or planning policies for the HCA. Interim control by-laws may not be necessary or practical in municipalities with little or no development activity in their HCAs.

Zoning By-laws (Section 34, Planning Act)

In addition to stipulating the permitted uses, zoning by-laws contain legally enforceable standards controlling the dimensions of set-backs, the amount of parking, size of the landscaped portion of each site, the minimum separation distance between access points and the area for the outside display of goods. The standards set out in the by-law should conform with the official plan and with the final plan prepared specifically for the HCA. Initially the new standards would most directly affect vacant sites and those areas in the corridor likely to undergo redevelopment or expansion. In the long run they should result in the upgrading of the quality of the existing development as well.

Free standing sign on a landscaped base. City of Mississauga.

Sign By-laws (Section 210, Municipal Act)

Sign by-laws can regulate the number, type, size, location, construction and maintenance of signs in the municipality. Consequently, it can be a powerful tool in the implementation of an improvement plan for an HCA. It can, as well, restrict the usage of specific types of signs (e.g. temporary signs). All the sign guidelines can be implemented through this by-law, but the effectiveness of the sign by-law will depend very much on the municipality's willingness to enforce it. If a sign by-law does not exist one should be prepared, and like the zoning by-law, should reflect the objectives of the final concept plan for the highway commercial area.

Site Plan Control (Section 40, Planning Act)

For new development, municipalities can incorporate site plan control provisions into their official plans. To this effect, the official plans must show or describe the areas proposed as site plan control areas. Within these areas, however, uses undergoing renovations or small expansions may be exempt.

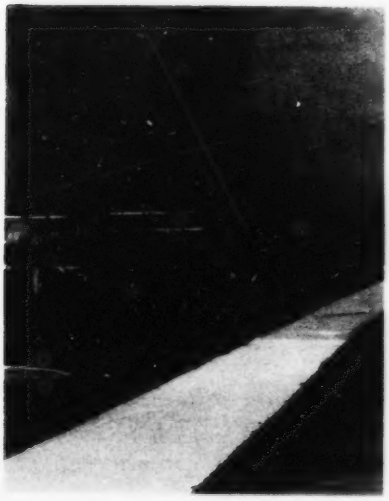
As a condition of the approval of plans or drawings for new development under site plan control, a municipality may require the land owner to provide to the satisfaction and at no expense to that municipality, any or all of the following:

- Facilities to provide access to and from the land such as access ramps and curbings and traffic direction signs;
- Off-street vehicular loading and parking facilities, either covered or uncovered, access driveways, including driveways for emergency vehicles;
- Walkways and walkway ramps, and all other means of pedestrian access;
- On-site lighting;
- Walls, fences, hedges, trees, shrubs or other facilities for the landscaping of the lands or protection of adjoining lands;
- Vaults, central storage facilities and enclosures for the storage of garbage and other waste material;
- Grading or alteration in elevation or contour of the land and provision for the disposal of storm, surface and waste water from the land and buildings;
- Widening of highways abutting on the land.

The land owner may also be required to enter into a site plan agreement with the municipality to ensure the provision and maintenance of any or all of the above facilities required.

Site plan control offers one of the best means for achieving the goals expressed in the final concept plan. Site plan control provides, as well, opportunities for negotiation between the developer and the municipality. These negotiations should be undertaken in a comprehensive manner leading to a single package between developers and municipality as opposed to individual agreements with line departments. In the application of site plan control, it is most important for the municipality to know very clearly what is to be achieved in the HCA in terms of improvements and to be able to convey its requirements to potential developers before they come forth with specific submissions. The preparation of HCA design guidelines by the municipality could greatly facilitate this process.

Outdoor display areas can be pleasant when properly handled.
City of Mississauga.



Bonus Zoning (Section 36, Planning Act)

Bonus provisions in the Planning Act provide municipalities with a legislative framework to offer incentives to developers in terms of increased height and density in return for certain specific improvements which otherwise would not be provided under the zoning by-law.

Prior to passing a bonusing by-law provision, a municipality is required to indude appropriate policies in the official plan. These policies should be detailed enough

so that everyone will know exactly how these bonus by-laws will be considered and to justify the bonus granted in terms of public benefit.

When considering the use of this tool in highway commercial areas, contact should be made with the Office of Local Planning Policy or with your local Community Planning Advisory Branch office of the Ministry of Municipal Affairs.

Temporary Use By-laws (Section 38, Planning Act)

This by-law allows land and buildings to be occupied by temporary uses otherwise not permitted under the zoning by-law for a time period not exceeding three years. However, council may pass another by-law to extend the temporary use for additional periods of not more than three years each. Farmers' markets and flea markets are examples of possible temporary uses. Such uses could play an important role in upgrading the appearance of vacant or under-utilized sites until a permanent use is established.

This legislation is not to be used in a way that will prevent the use of land for some purpose. Rather, it provides the means to zone lands for an appropriate short term use. Temporary uses to be permitted under the by-law must conform to the official plan. The official plan should establish policies for the range of uses which may be considered on a temporary use basis notwithstanding any other policy of the official plan.

Ground sign of reasonable dimensions. City of Mississauga.

Property Maintenance By-laws (Section 31, Planning Act)

Property maintenance by-laws prescribe minimum standards for the maintenance and occupancy of buildings and property. Municipalities have complete discretion over the contents of such by-laws. However, they generally contain two sections. One lists the definitions related to properties and buildings as a means of clarification. The other section sets out the structural standards for buildings and the level of acceptable standards for exterior properties. This section also would contain the penalties to be incurred for failure to comply. The principal benefits of these by-laws, to a municipality, are threefold:

- They will help achieve the community improvement objectives as outlined in the official plan;
- They will help to sustain and strengthen the municipal tax base;
- They will demonstrate to the Provincial Government a local commitment to revitalization, thus, opening the door for the community's participation in the many provincial assistance programs.

In terms of HCAs, property maintenance by-laws could be particularly effective in upgrading of the appearance of vacant sites.

Bloor West Village BIA.
City of Toronto.

Business Improvement Areas (BIAs)

The support of local businesses and property owners for improvements to the HCA should be gained by involving them early in the decision-making process. This could ultimately include the formation of a Business Improvement Area (BIA).

The concept of a Business Improvement Area was developed in Bloor West Village in Toronto in 1969. Since then more than 200 BIAs have been established in Ontario, some with as few as 22 members, others with as many as 2000.

A Business Improvement Area is a form of legal organization designed to help local business communities to upgrade and promote their commercial and shopping districts. A BIA is essentially a self-help mechanism. A BIA can be formed at the request of local merchants, who ask the municipal council to designate a specific geographic area as a Business Improvement Area.

When that designation is approved, the BIA can develop and undertake programs to improve and beautify public property within the designated area. It can also conduct advertising, promotion and publicity campaigns that benefit the area as a whole. These programs are funded by a municipal levy which is assessed against all business taxpayers in the designated area.

The BIA is managed by a Board of Management which develops these programs, usually with the assistance of a number of special committees. The Board of Management establishes a budget to fund the chosen programs, and presents that budget to the municipal council for approval.

Participation in the activities or management of the BIA is voluntary, but all business tax payers within the BIA area must contribute to the municipal levy which finances the BIA's programs.

The BIA can, as well, encourage the improvement of private properties by providing guidance on facade/property improvements to complement those in public areas. Or they can propose common graphic standards for commercial signage, and so forth.

Boulevard improvements.
City of Scarborough (Cliffside Village BIA).

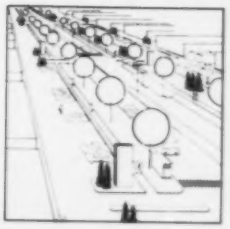
A successful BIA can:

- Attract and maintain customers for the area;
- Effectively promote the area;
- Increase participation by the municipal council and greater co-operation between municipal officials and the business community;
- Generate community pride;
- Encourage co-operation among merchants and professionals in the area;
- Provide a mechanism for undertaking short and long term projects in a planned and orderly manner.

The municipality can greatly influence the success of the BIA. It can provide the assistance of municipal employees or help find funding sources for BIA projects. It can also, through public works programs, enhance the physical appearance of the strip (e.g. resurfacing of the roadway or carrying out landscaping improvements) and so boost the willingness of business owners to improve their properties.

In partnership, the BIA and the municipality can accomplish the creation, in the HCA, of an environment of which the community as a whole will be proud.

For further information on BIAs, contact the Community Renewal Branch of the Ministry of Municipal Affairs (416-585-6013).



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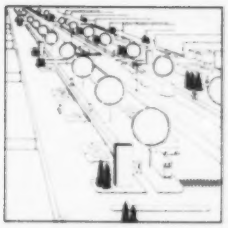

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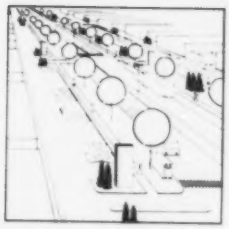

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